FACTS ABOUT SCHOOL SPEED ZONES

What is the purpose of a School Speed Zone?

A School Speed Zone can be used to reduce the speed limit on a street during times when schoolchildren cross the roadway. The purpose of a school speed zone is to reduce the speeds of vehicular traffic so that:

- A driver has more time to recognize and react to schoolchildren within the travel way, allowing enough distance to slow, evade and/or stop prior to an incident.
- Schoolchildren, especially young schoolchildren, can more accurately anticipate vehicular movements to safely cross the roadway at uncontrolled or unmarked locations.

How is it decided where School Speed Zones are installed?

The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), published by the Federal Highway Administration is the nationally recognized standard for traffic control adopted by the City of Lincoln. When considering a School Speed Zone, the MUTCD requires that an engineering study define appropriate locations (Section 7B.11) and further recommends uniform application by way of policy to achieve reasonably safe and effective traffic control (Section 7A.01). Public Works has adopted practices consistent with the requirements and guidance of the MUTCD for evaluating School Speed Zones.

School Speed Zones are only to be installed after a careful traffic engineering study of pedestrian routes, crossing activity, traffic volumes, vehicle speeds, and crash history indicates that the installation is appropriate. School walking routes and crosswalk locations are developed in the traffic study. School Speed Zones are encouraged where all of the following conditions exist:

- There is a school crosswalk with probable schoolchildren pedestrian crossing activity that is not protected by a traffic signal, stop sign, or other primary crossing protection.
- The adjacent school is elementary level instruction, and
- The posted speed limit is 40 mph or less.

School areas that do not satisfy these conditions should not have a school speed zone. For instance, in the following cases a school speed zone is discouraged:

- Street with already slow travel speeds (local streets etc.),
- Where crosswalks are controlled by a stop sign or traffic signal,
- When the school has no students who walk or ride bicycles to school (lack of pedestrian/bicycle accommodations or school policy prohibits students from walking or biking to school),
- If no children cross the roadway, or
- The posted speed limit is 45 mph or greater.

Unnecessary school speed zones are often disrespected by drivers, thereby increasing crash frequency from greater speed differentials and creating a false sense of security for pedestrians. Furthermore, unnecessary school speed zones compromise the effectiveness and safety of appropriate school speed zones.
Traffic Engineering

Why not install a School Speed Zone at every school?

Older schoolchildren have better cognitive skills which allow them to appropriately judge travel speeds and assess dangerous conditions. Young schoolchildren need the additional protection of traffic control devices to create longer gaps in traffic since their judgment and awareness is less developed. In accordance with standards and generally accepted traffic engineering practice, school speed zones are typically only considered adjacent to elementary level institutions.

Why not use a School Speed Zone for children that walk along the street?

A school speed zone should only be established where a child will likely enter the roadway where traffic controls are not present. Furthermore, the limits of a school speed zone are posted immediately approaching or adjacent to the school property. Consequently, the limits of a school speed zone cannot extend the length of the street where pedestrians walk for typical unrelated school activity.

Why not use a School Speed Zone for vehicular traffic safety?

A school speed zone should not be used for the sole purpose of reducing the speed of traffic. Moreover, a school speed zone cannot prevent vehicles from crashing into one another and inappropriate use will often increase the number of vehicle to vehicle crashes that occur. School speed zones are established for the safety of schoolchildren, not the motoring public. Streets that surround a school are not unique and often carry less traffic at slower speeds than other streets within the city that vehicles, including school buses, travel to serve students. Safety of vehicular traffic can best be improved by consistent school speed zone application and the elimination of unnecessary school speed zones.

Why not install a School Speed Zones where the speed limit is more than 40 mph?

Speed reductions of 20 mph or more are not recommended because studies have shown that driver compliance is slight. These variations of speed between compliant and noncompliant drivers tend to result in more frequent and severe crashes. In the interest of public safety, vehicular crashes should be minimized and alternate accommodations should be provided for schoolchildren that must cross the roadway.

In Summary...

School Speed Zones are used to reduce vehicle speeds in school areas where there is a high probability of young school aged pedestrians crossing a street at an uncontrolled location. Nationally recognized standards require an engineering study and established practices determine where school speed zones are appropriate. Unnecessary school speed zones are viewed by drivers as unreasonable and frequently results in flagrant violations, an attitude of contempt or disrespect in motorists, and a false sense of security for pedestrians. School speed zones can be a valuable tool in providing safe routes to school, however, inappropriate use will be more harmful than helpful.

For more information about school speed zones please call the Traffic Engineering Division at 441-7711 or email your questions/comments/concerns through Traffic Engineering’s website: lincoln.ne.gov/city/pworks/engine/traffic

Information collected from:
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